

Anglistentag 2015  
University of Paderborn



## **SECTION 4: BRAIN DRAIN OR BRAIN GAIN? THE FUTURE OF COGNITIVE LITERARY STUDIES**

**Organised by Sibylle Baumbach (Mainz), Ralf Haekel (Göttingen), Felix Sprang (München)**

### **Abstract Section 4**

More than a decade has passed since the ‘decade of the brain’ (1990-1999), and after a sobering phase of taking stock, neuroscience has picked up pace again recently and has inspired new research areas in the field of cognitive literary, cultural studies, and neuroaesthetics (cf. Herman, Hogan, Zunshine, Zeki). These approaches suggest innovative ways to think about the production of, and aesthetic response to works of art in general and literary texts in particular. At the same time, they serve as springboards for discussing the ways in which we view, read, and perceive artefacts. In the case of literature, these approaches spark off critical reflections upon the various mechanisms that inform both production and reception aesthetics. The recent trend towards neuroaesthetics, however, also raises questions with regard to the applicability of these approaches to literary studies and their potential limitations. Which new perspectives does empirical aesthetics have to offer to literary studies and what is its (expected) impact on the future of literary and cultural studies? To what extent can cognitive processes, which are activated in the act of reading, be regarded as human universals and to what extent are we dealing with culturally constructed phenomena that are specifically literary? What do we gain by neuroaesthetic approaches to literature and what, if anything, is lost?

In our section, we wish to address these questions and raise new ones in order to map the field of literary and cultural studies in current research. We further aim to scrutinize the contribution of literary studies in the field of cognitive cultural studies, to discuss the recent neuro-boom and its impact on literary studies, and to open up new perspectives for further research in this field.

**Thursday, 24 September 2015**

**11.00-11.15 am**

**Introduction**

**11:15am-12:00noon**

**Marcus Hartner & Ralf Schneider (Bielefeld)**

**What Cognitive Narratology *Can* Do: From Cognitive to Cultural Studies and Back**

Cognitive approaches in have been on the verge of going mainstream in literary studies for some time. Yet, they have not done so. Despite a slowly but steadily increasing interest in the subject for years, cognitive approaches have neither crystallized into a coherent, clearly outlined set of theories nor have they managed to acquire paradigmatic status in English literature departments so far. As a potential remedy for this apparent failure to convince the majority of literary scholars

of the potential gains of cognitive theories, the relevance of those theories for cultural studies has repeatedly been advertised in the recent past (e.g. Knellwolf King; Zunshine).

Our paper investigates this nexus of cognitive literary and cultural studies and argues that cognitive theories often unfold their potential to the fullest when organically integrated into genuinely non-cognitive approaches. In this context, and by way of example, we present the notion of “transnational mental spaces” developed in a current research project on “Contemporary British Fictions of Migration”. The project blends the sociological theory of ‘transnational social spaces’ (Thomas Faist) with Gilles Fauconnier’s cognitivist concept of ‘mental spaces’ in order to develop a transnational cultural narratology that incorporates insights from both cultural and cognitive literary studies. Starting from this example, we aim at discussing some of the basic difficulties cognitive approaches continue to face. Based on this reflection of what a cognitive narratology *can* do, we also point out general directions for the future development of this important field of research, and the role of narratology in the overall transfer of concepts from cognitive to cultural studies and back.

**12.00noon-12.45pm**

**Sven Strasen (Aachen)**

**Culture, Context and Cognition in Literary Reception – Literature, Reception, and Meaning Attribution in Cognitive Cultural Theory: Cultural Models as Interface**

As I have argued elsewhere, the decline of reader-response theories in the 1980s was caused by the failure to adequately conceptualize the *interaction* of textual, social and cognitive factors in meaning attribution by the classics of reader-response theory (Strasen 2008). These factors correspond to what Posner (1994) has called the material, social and mental dimensions of culture. The interface between these dimensions, I suggest, is what Holland and Quinn (1987) have called “cultural models”, i.e. cognitive schemata members of a culture share on the basis of regular occurrences in the humanly created world (Strauss and Quinn 1998). Therefore, cultural models are at the heart of contextualization processes in literary and non-literary communication, and, consequently, decisive for meaning attribution.

True as I still think this argument to be, it is rather abstract and its relevance stands or falls with the ability to reconstruct cultural models in such a way as to make them usable in concrete analyses of reception processes and, the other way round, the ability to analyse literary reception in a way that contributes to the reconstruction of cultural models. In other, Bradd Shore's (1996), words: “[W]e need to model brain-culture interactions so that they reveal at one and the same time the general cognitive processes of information processing and meaning construction as well as the culturally diverse manifestations of those processes in action.”

In my paper I want to sketch an outline of a research programme that attempts to do just that, by combining traditional literary scholarship with theoretical impulses from cognitive cultural studies and empirical research on reader-response to do both, better understand concrete reception processes and contribute to the reconstruction of cultural models which, in turn, will lead to a better understanding of the cognitive processes involved in meaning construction in general. I will conclude by briefly commenting on the most important methodological, institutional and practical consequences such a research programme will have.

**4.00-4.45pm**  
**Philipp Erchinger (Düsseldorf)**  
**Reading Experience**

The topic of my paper is the concept of (aesthetic) experience. More precisely, I wish to argue that the future can only be incorporated into cognitive literary studies by way of an experience of reading that remains open to (affecting, enchanting, exciting bewildering) encounters with what is not yet part of any presupposed (cognitive) pattern or norm. Conversely, I want to make the case that an experience which is taken to extend towards an unpredictable future has to be read in the mode of an ongoing process: by way of following its emergence along an open-ended path.

In order to make this case, I propose, firstly, to outline a model of what has been called “experience as a craft” (Sennett, Massumi). According to this model, ‘experience’ is neither exclusively made up of subjective phenomena nor of objective data, but is taken to be formed in the field in which the subjective and the objective become extended and translated into each other (William James). Secondly, I would like to exemplify this model through a reading of a dramatic monologue, a genre which – with reference to Robert Browning – has been described as an instance of “empiricism in literature”, concerned with “the pursuit of experience in all its remotest extensions” (Langbaum). In this way, I hope to make a few tentative steps towards a kind of literary criticism which is perhaps not so much ‘empirical’ as it is ‘experimental’.

**4.45-5.30pm**  
**Jürgen Meyer (Paderborn)**  
**Imagination as Object and Agent of ‘Mind’:**  
**Cognitive Studies and Eighteenth-Century Literary Criticism**

The recent impact of cognitive studies on literary studies is based on insights from neuroscientific theory. The field of the Anglophone Literatures instrumentalizes, from a late modern 21st-century view-point, these insights for a theoretical representation of text reception, including even such old texts as *Beowulf* (cf. Zunshine, *Why we read Fiction*, 2006). Whilst this approach seems to be convincingly effective for a theorizing about "our" ways of reading, the grasp on the brain in its historical dimension is still under-researched, despite the efforts shown in Alan Richardson's focus on post-Romantic mind theories (cf. Richardson, "Defaulting to Fiction", 2012). Especially the long eighteenth century seems a rewarding treasure trove for the historical analysis of synchronic mind-models deployed by theologians, natural philosophers, and artists. Such theories informed many contemporary theories of the ('critick's' and the 'common reader's') mind, as several outstanding philosophical, yet often anatomically and physically informed treatises show: John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), David Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), David Hartley's *Observations on Man* (1749), and James Beattie's *Essays, on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* (1776): Cognition, here, is considered under either spiritual or materialistic premises, with various degrees of permeability.

My paper will present an innovative reading of critical literature in its broader sense, including critical reviews in periodical literature (e.g., Addison, "Pleasures of the Imagination" in the *Spectator*, his Milton criticism in the same), essays on literature and aesthetics (Pope, *Essay on Criticism*, 1711), prefaces (by Dryden, and in Dr. Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, 1779-81) and other paratexts, and even responses to 'empirical' literary experience in "private" letters and diaries (e.g., Pepys). I will show in this material how it connects to the above theories, and how these are made functional for an empirical, often not least didactic, approach to literary reception.

**Friday, 25 September**  
**3.00-3.45pm**  
**Alexandra Berlina (Duisburg-Essen)**  
**Mind Refreshment: Ostranenie as a Cognitive Concept**

Some literary scholars hail cognitive studies as a principally new approach, one that finally and for the first time takes into account the reader's mind. Others denounce the emerging field as a reductive attempt to discuss only what is measurable, ignoring the finer points of a literary work. The proposed paper will argue that a cognitive approach to literature is very fruitful but far from new – in fact, it is very close to formalist and structuralist research. Much work done in Moscow and Prague pays close attention to the cognitive processes behind reading; contemporary cognitivism would do well to combine recent psychoneurological findings with such concepts as estrangement and fantastic ambiguity. At the example of Shklovsky and Todorov, the proposed paper will show the pre-cognitivist appeal of formalist and structuralist thinking.

**3.45-4.30pm**  
**Anja Müller-Wood (Mainz)**  
**Could do better: Why Cognitive Literary Studies have failed to live up to their promises**  
**(and what may be done about it)**

Although the term “cognitive” designates an academic growth area in the humanities, there is in fact no homogeneous field of Cognitive Literary (or Cultural) Studies. While many literary and cultural scholars associated with the adjective “cognitive” would subscribe to the currently pervasive claim that “meaning is embodied”, their approaches usually don't tend to converge beyond this vague common denominator. Instead, Cognitive Studies encompass highly diverse critical positions, represented by scholars so different they literally do not see eye to eye.

Some might see this as a situation of healthy competition or even creative Protean plenty. Others, like myself, find the amorphousness and eclecticism of Cognitive Studies counterproductive, not least because this seems to go against the promise of rigorous and reliable research that initially made cognitive science so attractive to scholars in the Humanities (in fact, recent cognitivist fashions such as “extended cognition”, epigenetics and neo-Whorfianism seem to return to the same postmodern open-endedness that Cognitive Studies initially sought to escape). If Cognitive Studies are to have a future, I argue in this paper, scholars associating themselves with this context ought to remind themselves not only of the roots of their critical perspective, but also try to go beyond the factionism that undermines this thorny field from within. This paper is in part a survey of Cognitive Studies, in part an attempt at formulating the parameters of a more integrated perspective; above all it is a plea for scholars open to ideas taken from the cognitive sciences to be more cautious and differentiated in their claims and to honour the concerns of their own disciplines – whose time-honoured interests and methodologies should not (and probably cannot) always be replaced by approaches and theories appropriated from without.

**4.30-4.45 pm**  
**Closing remarks**